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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NICOSIA 000447

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [EUN](#) [TU](#) [CY](#)
SUBJECT: TALAT'S ILLNESS LEAVES TURKISH CYPRIOTS RUDDERLESS
REF: A. LIBBY-INGMANSON EMAIL (2/27/06)

- [1](#)B. NICOSIA 294
- [1](#)C. NICOSIA SIPRNET DAILY REPORT (3/16/06)
- [1](#)D. NICOSIA SIPRNET DAILY REPORT (3/21/06)
- [1](#)E. NICOSIA 273

Classified By: Ambassador R. Schlicher, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. The Turkish Cypriots have been foundering in a political vacuum since "TRNC President" Mehmet Ali Talat's February bypass surgery. Subsequent political developments with regard to EU aid and UN-brokered talks have caught the Turkish Cypriots flatfooted, prompting muddled responses from a rudderless "TRNC" that has been left in the hands of bickering political rivals. As Talat gradually gets back to work over the next month, the Turkish Cypriots will likely adopt a more decisive, coherent political approach to the outside world -- with all the positives and negatives this entails. Ambassador Schlicher is to see Talat on March 27.
END SUMMARY.

TALAT OUT OF COMMISSION

[1](#)2. (C) Turkish Cypriot leader Mehmet Ali Talat has been temporarily removed from the political scene since his unexpected coronary bypass surgery on February 27 (ref a). Talat's extended convalescence started with a 2-week hospitalization in Turkey, and has been followed by several weeks of bed rest at home in Kyrenia. According to Talat's private secretary, "the President" will remain away from the office for another ten days, and may not be back to work full time until April or even May.

[1](#)3. (C) Talat's illness has left a serious vacuum at the heart of Turkish Cypriot politics. Although the "TRNC" continued to function with "Parliament" Speaker Fatma Ekenoglu taking on the role of "acting president," Talat's absence was nonetheless keenly felt. As the directly elected leader of the Turkish Cypriot community, Talat enjoys a legitimacy abroad -- and therefore authority at home and with Turkey -- not shared by any other officials of the unrecognized "TRNC." Although members of his inner circle acknowledge that he takes decisions in consultation with his close friends and allies on the powerful Central Committee of the ruling CTP, Talat's public stature is nonetheless unmatched. Whatever sway the CTP's Central Committee enjoys behind the scenes, it cannot match the "presidential" bully pulpit in terms of credibility.

[1](#)4. (C) Furthermore, Talat plays a unique balancing role in the antagonistic relationship between "PM" Ferdi Soyer (Talat's long-time CTP political ally) and his junior coalition partner "DPM/FM" Serdar Denktash (a nationalist wing-nut who nonetheless considers Talat a close friend). Without frequent refereeing from Talat, Ferdi and Serdar can each be counted on to assert themselves on the political

stage -- in opposite directions, to destructive effect.

BALLS DROPPED, SIGNALS MIXED

15. (C) Several important events have taken place since Talat's hospitalization -- events to which the politically rudderless Turkish Cypriots have responded with muddled confusion. The most noteworthy of these was the February 28 Annan-Papadopoulos meeting in Paris, which produced a joint declaration on bicommunal technical talks, as well as an "unacceptable" (from the Turkish Cypriot perspective) reference to the politically charged issues of Varosha and demilitarization (ref b). The Turkish Cypriots and Turkey personally blame the UN's man on Cyprus, Michael Moeller, for the "disastrous" communique. But since Talat was "doped up at the time" (according to his private secretary), he could not take charge of -- or seek to moderate -- Turkish Cypriot reactions to the Paris meeting. First off the blocks, therefore, was "FM" Serdar (no doubt egged on by Ankara), who issued a prickly letter demanding "clarification" from the UN. Meanwhile lower-level employees of the "presidency" led by U/S Rasit Pertev sought to outflank Serdar -- whom they felt was horning in on the Boss's territory -- by making it clear that the Turkish Cypriots took umbrage at Moeller, and "freezing communication" with the SRSG.

16. (C) The Turkish Cypriots similarly bungled a March 6 visit by the European Parliament's "Contact Group" for northern Cyprus. The visit was dominated by a headline-grabbing, egg-throwing protest (again, led by Serdar) over the group's stated purpose of visiting "Cypriots in the north." ("We're Turks!" cried Serdar.) Political lightweight Ekenoglu and the CTP second-stringers, who saw the group in Talat's place, were unable to outshout Serdar. According to one close Talat

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advisor, the visit should have celebrated the Turkish Cypriots' evolving links with Europe, but devolved instead into an ugly shouting match since nobody of authority could set the proper tone. "I wonder if they'll ever come back," he sighed to us.

CRAWLING BACK TO HIS DESK

17. (C) Talat is clearly aware that his absence is causing problems, and he is slowly trying to reassert himself as his health allows. He has agreed to see Ambassador Schlicher (the first foreigner to visit Talat post-op) March 27 to discuss the way ahead on UN-brokered talks. Meanwhile, "Presidency" insiders report Talat was behind the decision to delay the "TRNC" census (ref c), ordering changes to how the survey would handle the potentially explosive question of Turkish settlers. Talat also intervened in a spat between Ferdi and Serdar over whether or not to "accept" EU aid (refs d and e), inviting the two leaders to a bury-the-hatchet session at his bedside and reasserting the policy Talat had decided before his operation -- that the "TRNC" would consult with the EU on aid, but would not block project implementation at this time.

18. (C) COMMENT. Turkish Cypriot "foreign policy" seems likely to regain coherence gradually as Talat climbs back into the saddle. But this is no guarantee that the Turkish Cypriots will suddenly strike a more reasonable tone, for example, in their dealings with the UN. Talat is a clever politician, but sometimes lets his anger get the better of him -- leading to counterproductive (albeit coherent) policies. Still, once Talat is back at work full time, there will at last be a single interlocutor for the UN and, when needed, a clear address for friends like us and the UK to lobby for better behavior.

19. (C) It is particularly important that the Turkish Cypriots re-establish a positive coherence soon, since their

mishandling of events in Talat's absence, added to a lack of positive reinforcement from Ankara in the same time-frame, have let Papadopoulos score significant PR points at home and elsewhere. It is very much in the interests of the Turkish Cypriots and Ankara to shift the mantle of nay-sayer back onto the shoulders of Tassos Papadopoulos. END COMMENT.
SCHLICHER